

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This study on recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning, in short RVA, seeks to contribute to the vast and growing field of interest in recognition – or making visible and valuing knowledge, skills and competences, and learning that is still largely invisible. While it is widely accepted by educationists, governments and the general public, that learning takes place not only in formal educational or training institutions but also in the workplace and in non-formal and informal activities, not all learning is formally recognised. A number of international organisations – particularly the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the European Union (EU) – have conducted studies on the RVA experience across different country contexts. However, those studies have varied greatly in terms of focus, agenda and direction. For this reason, it is important to clarify at the outset the focus of this study and the useful and distinctive contribution it seeks to make to the growing body of knowledge and ideas concerning recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

### 1.1 Context and Rationale

For the purposes of this study the acronym RVA is used. It was coined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and means the *recognition, validation and accreditation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning*: a practice that

renders visible and gives value to the hidden and unrecognised competences that individuals have obtained in various contexts, through various means in different phases of their lives. Valuing and recognising these learning outcomes may significantly improve individuals' self-esteem and well-being, motivate them to further learning and strengthen their labour

market opportunities. RVA may help to integrate broader sections of the population into an open and flexible education and training system and to build inclusive societies. (UIL 2012, p. 3)

In the context of non-formal and informal learning the term ‘recognition’ has several different meanings. In a general sense, it can mean the process of giving official status to competences (or learning outcomes) through the awarding of qualifications, equivalencies, credits, or the issuing of documents such as portfolios of competences. It can also refer to social recognition in terms of the acknowledgement of the value of skills and competences in the labour market or for academic entry or progression – sometimes called currency. It refers to the acceptance of the principle of recognition of non-formal and informal learning by national education, training and employment stakeholders (UIL 2012). Ultimately, it underlines the recognition that learning is a social activity and depends for its value on its embeddedness within a social framework.

This study examines the implementation of RVA and its impact on those who have acquired skills outside the formal education system. For such people recognition is a means of facilitating first-time or renewed participation in formal education and training, or of recognising skills gained in the workplace or through voluntary work. In other words, such recognition has both a personal, individual impact and a social and economic effect upon the collective. This *impact* has many dimensions (from psychological and personal through to the communal), and *transfer value* in the labour market, *progression value* within an education system, as well as *use value* in daily life situations.

To put it more simply, the present study aims to further an understanding of the following:

- How RVA policy and practice contribute, or could contribute further, to improving quality of life and well-being in those countries that need it most;
- How such recognition is crucial to the educational, economic and social development of many countries;
- The features of good practice in RVA processes that can be shared;
- The key factors that influence the use of RVA in different learning environments;
- The main challenges to the practice of RVA; and
- How RVA can be a part of an appropriate policy response to education and training.

## 1.2 Sharing Learning Across Countries

There is no single, simple way that a country should approach the use of RVA in order to achieve the desired personal, social and economic *impact*. Rather, there are many examples of diverse, successful approaches to RVA that can be shared, discussed and developed in new ways to achieve a country’s goals. This study,

therefore, considers examples from a variety of countries in the global North and South. The study's distinctive contribution to the RVA discussion is to harness lessons learnt about RVA from many contexts, and to present these as an enabling contribution to RVA policy discourse in less developed countries.

In countries where the large sections of the population have yet to gain access to even the most basic education, the debate on the recognition, validation and accreditation of existing skills, knowledge and competences can seem less crucial. However, it is precisely at the time when countries are developing broader learning reforms – such as the introduction of lifelong learning strategies, competence-based qualifications or national qualifications frameworks – that it is necessary to discuss access to concepts and mechanisms that promote equality and value alternative ways of acquiring knowledge, such as RVA.

The challenge facing governments and other stakeholders is to find ways to harness the benefits of a coherent RVA framework in tandem with broader educational goals such that it promotes substantive equality and inclusiveness for all members of society.

The perspectives of developing and least developed countries where basic education, economic and social systems are facing acute challenges – have much to teach all countries, both developed and developing, about innovation and opportunity in RVA. Those perspectives can also provide crucial information to governments about how to respond to grassroots community developments in educational programmes such as community-school interactions and how to strengthen informal learning in adult and community learning programmes. Although these programmes and centres operate outside the official education system, they provide youth and adults with a foundation for future development and learning. In light of this, the present study emphasises policy dialogue and learning rather than policy borrowing.

Policy dialogue and learning are particularly important in the context of a “politics of knowledge and a politics of competing theories of knowledge” (Visvanathan 2001). In taking issue with Castells' *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), and calling for Science to open up to the knowledge of the people, Visvanathan (2001, p. 4) criticises Castells' network society as lacking an explicit theory of knowledge or the varieties of knowledge. Citing Richards (1983) on African models of farming, Visvanathan makes a point about varieties.

As Paul Richards argues, African models of farming might embody different notions of community and science. It is this community of expertise that the official application of development [model of Science] might have destroyed. Within such a framework, African agriculture and systems of healing might be alternative paradigms, elusive and elliptical to current models of science. Viewed in this way, the Fourth World becomes not a void or a black box but an alternative list of diversities, possibilities, epistemologies (Visvanathan 2001, p. 5).

Visvanathan also cites Wes Jackson (1987), a botanist, who observed that though we are in the midst of an informational explosion, few dispute the loss of biological and cultural information. Cultural information is the information that has left the rural area and the kind of information that is the necessary basis for a sustainable agriculture.

For Visvanathan the definition of knowledge is crucial to the debate about what counts as knowledge. To define knowledge solely as formal, abstractable knowledge is to impoverish knowledge and to deny the existence of tacit, embodied and, alternative knowledge. Visvanathan calls such sensitivity to alternative ideas of knowledge the “dialogue of knowledges” or “cognitive justice”. Cognitive justice asserts the diversity of knowledges and the equality of knowers. Visvanathan defines cognitive justice “as the right of many forms of knowledge to exist because all knowledges are seen as partial and complementary and because they contain incommensurable insights” and because they are “link[ed] to livelihood, lifestyles and forms of life” (p. 8).

Defending Visvanathan’s notion of cognitive justice, against the charge of an “everything goes” relativism, Van der Velden (2006, p 13) argues that Visvanathan is not arguing for romantic, “museumised” or revivalist ideas of a return to indigenous and traditional knowledge and solutions that are unrealistic in the context of a political and economic globalisation (See Visvanathan 2001). Rather the solution, he argues, lies in a political economy based on the following cognitive principles:

Cognitive justice is first of all a call for making other ways of knowing visible, in particular the knowledge of the defeated and the marginalised. Only on that basis, argues Visvanathan, is it possible to examine the validity of these different ways of knowing. The supposed validity of people’s knowledge lies not ... in the fact that there are diverse ways of knowing (the logical fallacy). Their relative validity will be realised through their inclusion in the heuristic dialogue between (conflicting) knowledges. It is in that sense that these different ways of knowing are valid: they should be treated equal in terms of access to and participation in dialogues of knowledges (Van der Velden 2006, p. 14).

A similar dialogic principle is relevant for the so-called “informal economies” where alternative communities of practice and culturally relevant knowledge are important aspects of professional development. In this context, Michelson (2012) suggests that recognition be understood not as a mere technical issue involving the accumulation of skills and the accreditation of informal knowledge hitherto disregarded, but as an engagement with alternative communities of practice, disparate forms of cultural expression, environmental traditions and workplace practices. Recognition, she argues, needs to be understood as a holistic exploration of the knowledge, skills and understandings that exist in individuals and communities. Recognition speaks to the human aspiration to be seen and honoured for what one already knows, and to be given new learning opportunities and to contribute to society through creative and meaningful work. As Michelson (2012) points out, recognition ‘is central both to recognising the skills that exist in the workplace, creating learning pathways where gaps exist, and distinguishing a true “skills gap” from what is better understood as a “recognition gap”’ (Michelson 2012, pp. 21). Michelson argues that by relocating recognition of non-formal and informal learning within an epistemology of situated knowledge, we can reconfigure it as a dialogue across alternative modalities of knowledge. This, she says, is not a question of epistemological relativism, or of softening of academic “standards”. Rather recognition is a way of making the criteria of judgement visible and it can grant visibility to knowledge that is valuable for its divergence from formal ways of knowing. Most importantly, Michelson argues, “RPL [Recognition of Prior Learning] can become an important venue

for revising the relationship between authorised and devalued forms of knowledge *precisely because it formalises it.*" (Michelson 2006, p 155).

In the so-called "knowledge-based economies", the "dialogue of knowledges" has been described by Livingstone and Guile (2012) in terms of the "interplay" between those responsible for generating the knowledge that constitutes curricula in formal learning on the one hand, and occupational epistemic cultures that arise through the interplay between the desire of experts (knowledge workers) to continue their individual informal on-the-job-learning and the organisations nurturing that desire, on the other.

The development of the knowledge society based on dialogical learning means that non-formal and informal learning is an expanding aspect of adult learning. This is also evident from the evolving informal learning processes and supporting non-formal learning pedagogies and applications in the digital age. Paradigms such as just-in-time learning, constructivism, learner-centred learning and collaborative approaches have emerged and are being supported by technological advancements such as simulations, digital gaming, virtual reality and multi-agents systems (International Association for Development of the Information Society (IADIS) 2012).

In the context of the present study, it will be important to ask how, for example, RVA could promote and build upon the latent capabilities, understandings, values and attitudes, perceptions, creative capacities and resourcefulness which adults have and which they use in the everyday transactions and tasks of their working, learning and community lives? How could this learning potential, these everyday strategies of learning be harnessed to increase employability, promote lifelong learning and reduce poverty?

### 1.3 The High Relevance of RVA in the UNESCO Context

Since its early days, UNESCO, as the United Nations agency responsible for education, has continuously supported the renewal of educational structures, contents and methods at all levels. UNESCO programmes emphasise both the development of flexible, diversified modes of learning that are adapted to young people's and adults' needs, languages and cultures, and their acquisition of practical skills for active daily life and employment. Another objective UNESCO has promoted as important for sustainable learning is the participation of all interested stakeholders and partners at local, national and international levels in the development and renovation of education systems.

The study deals with issues that are at the top of the policy and research agenda in many countries around the world. It is highly relevant in the UNESCO context since RVA ranks among the possible ways to redress the glaring lack of relevant qualifications in many developing countries and to promote the development of competences and certification procedures which recognise different types of learning, including formal, non-formal and informal learning, everyday knowledge and skills, practical wisdom and indigenous knowledge.

The opening up of learning systems to RVA is a central tenet of the “learning society” as expressed in the Faure Report, *Learning to Be*:

If learning involves all of one’s life, in the sense of both time-span and diversity, and all of society, including its social and economic as well as its educational resources, then we must go even further than the necessary overhaul of “educational systems” until we reach the stage of a learning society. For these are the true proportions of the challenge education will be facing in the future? (Faure et al. 1972, p. xxxiii)

According to this report, a learning society embodies fundamental alternatives to the prevailing concepts and structures of education, which are as pressing today as they were more than 40 years ago, when the Faure Report was first published. They include:

- restoring the “dimension of living experience” to education, focusing not on “the path an individual has followed, but what he [or she] has learnt or acquired” (p. 185); acknowledging and setting up all paths, whether formal, or informal, institutionalised or not, that employ different learning methods;
- providing an “over-all open education system [that] helps learners to move within it, both horizontally and vertically, and widen[ing] the range of choice available to them” (pp. 183, 185, 188);
- giving every worker the right “to re-enter the educational circuit in the course of his [or her] active life” (p. 190);
- changing certification procedures in order to rule out premature selection. Procedures should stress the value of “real competence”, aptitude and motivation over and above marks, class ranking or formal credits obtained (p. 190);
- ensuring that “access to different types of education and professional employment depend *only* on each individual’s knowledge, capacities and aptitudes” (p. 203, emphasis added).

The Faure Report defines a learning society as one in which learning is valued by all members of society, in which stakeholders invest in recognising and developing human learning potential, and everyone regards people’s non-formal and informal learning as a cornerstone of lifelong learning strategies.

The notion of a learning society has far reaching implications not only for the redirection of the formal educational system but also for policies, theories and practices concerned with lifelong learning, which many authors like Hager and Halliday (2009) consider to be unfortunately based on the assumption that such learning should be predominantly formal. This assumption according to them excludes the educative possibilities of informal learning which they consider to be equally worthwhile as formal learning, because informal learning relates to the social circumstances of people, to cultural transmission between generations, and to the “variety of mutually shared interests” (Dewey 1966, p 322). And these aspects are necessary for a democratic and harmonious societal development. According to them, “there is a necessarily a balance to be struck between formal and informal learning and that one is not inherently superior to another” (p. 2). In the same vein, Rogers (2014) argues that lifelong learning should be promoted not only as

a learning programme with a purposeful agenda; rather it should take into account the “universal natural learning for the specific”. It matters to take this informal learning into account because firstly tacit or implicit knowledge and understandings form the basis for our decisions and actions; secondly informal learning helps to develop skills, which we develop unconsciously in the course of the many tasks we undertake, be they mental skills such as calculations or physical skills such as making a meal; and thirdly it is mainly through informal learning that a whole range of perceptions, feelings and attitudes are developed (pp. 32–41).

## **1.4 Addressing the Challenges of a Learning Society**

The educational challenges UNESCO foresaw several decades ago are not so different from the learning challenges confronting us today. In the context of rapid societal transformation arising from globalisation, the information revolution and the need for sustainable economies, the learning systems of “the North” and “the South” face the same general issues of social inequality. Not everyone has the same opportunities to enter education and attain specified outcomes, be they standard indicators of school attainment or broader parameters, including environmental, health and cultural education. At the same time, there is a growing education-job gap and a widening chasm between the haves and have-nots. One of the principal consequences of such inequality is a major under-utilisation of existing human potential, talents and human resources, which people may have acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings. These settings have long been underexploited and not counted as real learning or with real outcomes. Furthermore, formal education and training systems are finding it increasingly difficult to respond to the full range of individual and social needs and demands in an ever changing world. There is therefore clearly a need to accord sufficient esteem and respect to the unrecognised potential in society and to make better social and economic use of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning by offering a greater range of avenues for self-improvement and personal fulfilment to all citizens, increasing a country’s economic potential and making its political arrangements more socially inclusive.

## **1.5 Human Capabilities and the Social Dimensions of Learning**

The prevalent dependence on formal education in the past meant that social goals such as the promotion of social cohesion and democratic citizenship and the preservation of humanistic values were neglected. By emphasising knowledge, capabilities and competences in all social contexts, a learning society involves all

social and cultural groups, irrespective of gender, age, social class, ethnicity, mental health difficulties, etc. People are encouraged to learn throughout their lives – to learn what they like, when they like, and from whomever they like – and to impart their knowledge to those who wish to learn from them (Naik 1977).

Lifelong learning that values all varieties of non-formal and informal learning, seeks to open up the individual learner's prospects within the social context. A wide range of types of learning exist and add social value. Competences acquired in informal and non-formal situations are essential to each individual's performance in the labour market and the education system, as well as in local communities and volunteer work. Central here, then, is the insight that we are always learning everywhere, albeit not always in a conscious or self-chosen learning situation. Likewise, we should be mindful of our non-formal and informal learning achievements and the possibility of building on these acquired competences.

The acquisition of such self-awareness – who we are and how to use our talents – is a precondition for “deployability” and “employability” “Deployability” denotes the potential to increase our general capability as persons in order to enhance our contribution and participation in society. Greater self-awareness through recognition involves not only the differentiation of one's self from others but also the development of self-awareness and self-caring in and through solidarity with humanity and through direct engagement and action in the world (Gibbs and Angelides 2004, p. 336). This point is eloquently elaborated upon by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in his influential book *Development as Freedom* (2000). The recognition of the individual's value in order to empower people and provide social opportunities lies at the centre of his book. Sen (2000, p. 31) identifies “social opportunities” as one of the five instrumental freedoms (the others being political freedoms, economic facilities, transparency guarantees, and protective security) that influence our substantive freedom to live better and advance our general capabilities. With adequate social opportunities (such as support for RVA and basic education), we can effectively shape our own destiny and help each other. He observes, “Individual freedom is quintessentially a social product, and there is a two-way relation between (1) social arrangements to expand individual freedoms and (2) the use of individual freedoms not only to improve the respective lives but also to make the social arrangements more appropriate and effective” (p. 31).

Sen argues that, while human capital and labour market integration are important, they form only a part of the picture and require supplementation. Societies need to develop approaches that encompass the notion of human capabilities and the social dimensions of learning (Sen 1993). In the context of the RVA of non-formal and informal learning, Sen's observations suggest that broadening the scope of recognition, validation and accreditation to include all types of learning outside the mainstream mutually reinforces human capabilities in a society and the opportunities that the society offers. The development of individual capabilities is the aim of RVA, and serves as the driving force for social change, development and social progress. As social opportunities and human capabilities are cultivated, substantive freedom is promoted.



Individual freedoms and choices are also principal determinants of individual initiative and social effectiveness. The individual, as an “agent”, “acts and brings about change”, and his or her “achievements can be judged in terms of his or her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well” (p. 19). Sen’s ideas concerning agency can be seen in discussions of RVA in the learning theories of Lave and Wenger (1991). They see learning as a result of participation in “communities of practice” in which learning cannot be reduced to the passive reception of items of knowledge. The individual learner acquires the skill to perform by actually engaging in an on-going process of learning. Learning is not merely reproduction but actually the reformulation and renewal of knowledge and competences (Bjørnåvold 2000). The notion of agency also presupposes social capital, social networks and trust (Coleman 1988, 1994; Schuller and Field 1998). A feature of learning in non-formal and informal settings is the development at the individual level of the capability to mobilise resources (that is, other people/institutions/technologies) in order to address arising challenges (Livingstone and Guile 2012, p. 357).

Similarly, Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) emphasise “reflexivity”, specifically that the learning society requires that individuals and institutions reflect on themselves, the choices they make and their relationships to others. The UNESCO publication *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors 1996) – also known as the “Delors Report” – acknowledges that lifelong learning must not only adapt to changes in the nature of work, but must also constitute a continuous process of forming whole beings – their knowledge and aptitudes, as well as the critical faculty and *ability to act*. [RVA has the potential to] enable people to develop awareness of themselves and their environment and encourage them to play their social role at work and in the community. (p. 19). In the context of the Report’s “four pillars of education”, education is not only about learning to know, but also entails learning *to be, to live together, and learning to do*.

Schuller and Field (1998) considered the relationship between social capital and learning not only in respect of high educational attainment but more widely in the context of the learning society. They prefer to see social capital as both internally differentiated and constantly changing. They give the examples of high flows of information and the fostering of mutual approaches to problem solving through membership of close social networks. But they also see social networks as restricting the range of actors from whom information is sought (as with family businesses). Similarly, in the context of globalising tendencies, the link between space and social capital is being uncoupled, so that one may share relations of reciprocity and trust with neighbours and kin, yet engage in the close social networks and institutions which are remote and perhaps even short lived (Beck 1992).

On the issue of measurement and recognition of social capital they consider it to be helpful to think not of alternative and competing sets of measures, but of “nested sets”, from the narrowest qualifications-focused to the broadest set of social indicators. At the heart of the learning society they consider the importance of more debate on the precise types of social arrangements and kinds of contexts (voluntary, youth work, sports, leisure) which promote communication, reflexivity and mutual

learning over time. Finally, on the relationships between different varieties of knowledge they note: “Rather than accumulating certificates as individual pieces of evidence of human capital, we need to ask what the balance is across portfolios held by individuals and by groups, so that the awards are related to the social units which are to deploy the knowledge and skills” (Schuller and Field, p. 234). They thus raise the issue of balance between human and social capital as an important one facing policy makers and providers, appealing to the pragmatic needs of the employers and learners while retaining the cultural interest and knowledge of those who perceive the value of learning as predominantly a means of personal development and self and community fulfilment (Atkin 2000, p. 263).

## 1.6 Key Areas for Analysis

A vast amount of information about education, training and learning exists that would be useful in a cross-country conversation about RVA. However, providing an exhaustive and comprehensive survey of each country of interest would not be a practical way to contribute to this dialogue. Such a comprehensive approach would be unwieldy. Instead, we shall focus on a small group of topics that promise to be of strategic value in the on-going discussion about how RVA might best link up with broader objectives of both developed and developing countries. For the purposes of this study the following areas of analysis are highlighted as useful starting points for sharing learning across the North and the South, and between developed and developing countries:

1. The strategic value of RVA (legislation, policy objectives for sustainable development, stakeholder involvement).
2. The features of best practice and of the quality of processes and mechanisms to be employed.
3. The outcomes in view of the challenges a given country faces and the directions in which it aims to move in the future.

### 1.6.1 *The Strategic Value of RVA*

We take the strategic value of RVA to be an issue about motivations, overarching strategies, purposes and uses that countries have for implementing recognition and how effective and successful they are in achieving their sustainable development targets. Unless governments think strategically about embracing RVA, grassroots initiatives alone are unlikely to realise the full potential for recognising non-formal and informal learning to the benefit of individuals, communities and economies.

The question of the strategic-level analysis is a large one. It comprises three sections.

- First, it deals with questions of how high RVA is on a country's political agenda and how it is reflected in legislation and lifelong learning policies and strategies.
- Second, it deals with the status of RVA in the broader country policy objectives of the education and training system and their connection to sustainable development.
- Third, it deals with the interests and motives of the different stakeholders.

Strategic value refers also to the extent to which countries regard RVA as part of broader education and training reforms and as a key element of lifelong learning and sustainable development. In light of this, it is necessary to discuss briefly the theoretical understanding of what 'strategic value' entails.

Although there are few theoretical perspectives on the notion of "strategic value", Downes and Downes' "organic systems theory" (2007), may provide a useful way to understand the notion of "strategic value" from a systemic perspective. They characterize system change in terms of certain structural or transformational indicators: sustained interventions; a focus on transition difficulties; developing links between different parts of the system and subsystems in a two-way flow; feedback built into systemic responses; promotion of growth rather than focusing on deficits; an organic system is dynamic and changing rather than static and inert; a multileveled focus is needed to bring about system level change. Much like "system change", "strategic value" may be considered to include many of these elements. From a systems perspective, strategic value will involve holistic thinking.

For Bjørnåvold (2000), institutional and political requirements must first be met if genuine value is to be given to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. "This can be done partly through political decisions securing the legal basis for initiatives but should be supplemented by a process where questions of 'ownership' and 'control' as well as 'usefulness' must be clarified" (p. 22). It is important for enterprises and institutions to trust and accept the results of RVA of non-formal and informal learning. The participation by all stakeholders and the role of information as highlighted by Eriksen (1995) are also important strategic issues. How, for example, are stakeholders involved in RVA and how these stakeholders respond to RVA according to national and local conditions and needs are important issues of strategic value. The future role of systems for RVA cannot therefore be limited to technical questions of methodology, but must consider the role RVA serves in society, the individual, the labour market and the education and training system.

It may also be useful to view the strategic value of RVA in relation to the broader and more diverse sets of goals within the framework for sustainable development identified by governments in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO 2005). Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in which so many governments, authorities and agencies are currently preoccupied, includes education that is based on such principles and values as respect for others, respect for difference and diversity, respect for responsibility, exploration and dialogue. These principles and values deal with all diverse realms of sustainable development – namely environment, society and economy – and promote lifelong

learning. ESD should be locally relevant, culturally appropriate and based on local needs, precepts and conditions, but should also acknowledge that fulfilling local needs often has international effects and consequences (UNESCO 2005).

This understanding of ESD provides a useful strategic framework for the analysis of RVA from environmental, educational, economic, social and cultural, and individual perspectives. From an “environmental” perspective, the analysis of RVA’s strategic value deals with the enabling policy and legislative environments. From the educational perspective, the analysis considers a country’s policy objectives that contribute to avenues for educational progression and qualifications. From an economic perspective, the analysis involves the strategic role of recognition in workforce development and employability. From the social and cultural perspective, the analysis concerns how processes of recognition are helping to address the challenges of equality, inclusiveness and democratic understanding. And finally from the individual perspective, the analysis involves the role of RVA to offer a greater range of avenues for personal empowerment and development and self-improvement. We are aware that these aims of RVA cannot really be separated from one another. There is a close interplay between compulsory and post-compulsory education and training, adult and continuing learning, and informal learning within the community, at home, in the workplace, in social and cultural agencies, and in universities and colleges, for a better workforce and at the same time a better democracy and equitable society and a more fulfilling life.

### ***1.6.2 Best Practice and Quality of RVA Mechanisms and Processes***

The analysis of best practice will identify crucial features of the RVA methods and processes, and the factors that contribute to the sustainability of learning processes. RVA concerns almost always specialised advisory, administrative and pedagogic (or mediating) processes, as well as differing types of valid evidence and assessment. The discussion on methods is closely linked to the challenge of interpreting standards, in particular how the concepts of learning outcomes and competences underpinning reference frameworks are understood and applied. The important issue in quality and transparency of assessment and recognition processes relates to developing methodologies for making visible kinds of knowledge that have long been excluded from mainstream curriculum or standards development processes and that have meaning and relevance for individuals, societies and economies. Quality also implies a shift to education and programmes that are more demand-driven rather than supply-driven; where individuals are not mere receivers of education and where motivated individuals have an interest in continuing to learn.

Building upon the UN framework of indicators regarding the international right to health, it will be useful to include “process” indicators in order to study features of best practice and quality of RVA mechanisms. According to Stecher (2005), process indicators provide a better picture of the quality of services and better

information for programme improvement. As Downes (2011, p. 133) explains, “If a structural indicator level analyses the presence or absence of a policy or law, a process indicator is focused more on its implementation dimensions.” In our study we examine the issue of defining and monitoring quality in recognition processes by documenting examples of recognition practices in different countries and analysing quality more closely with regard to:

- Standards and methods of assessment.
- Delivering RVA and strengthening professionalism.
- Quality assurance mechanisms.

### ***1.6.3 The Challenges and Future Directions in RVA***

The third area of analysis of RVA pursued in this study concerns the challenges and future directions in RVA. The recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning is a constantly evolving field, and many countries are poised to implement significant changes in the future that will impact on the ongoing RVA dialogue. The challenges will be analysed at three levels: macro, meso and micro. Challenges at the macro level include absence of a legal frameworks, national guidelines and regulatory frameworks for regional coordination and quality. Obstacles to RVA highlighted at the meso and micro levels include institutional attitudinal resistance, convincing providers and enterprises, and lack of communication and delays in processing RVA.

With regard to the future directions in RVA, we believe it is important to view RVA’s contribution to lifelong learning as closely linked with the need for countries to learn and define their own RVA values and to make RVA an expression of their efforts to contribute to social, economic and educational development (Keevy et al. 2012). At the same time, given the global context, a common understanding and language are needed in order to promote the continuous exchange of country experiences in RVA. The emphasis, therefore, will be on arriving at common benchmarks which policy makers and practitioners could use to ensure that policies and practice articulate more purposefully with the holistic principles of lifelong learning and sustainable development.

## **1.7 Methodology**

The present study focuses on a sample of countries selected according to strategies that Miles and Huberman (1994) have highlighted, namely “logic of maximum variation” and “criterion”. The focus on the logic of maximum variation seeks to identify countries from different regions of the world, while the strategy of criterion identifies the criteria of selection.

From the perspective of maximum variation, the countries from the North and the South were selected in order to have a fair regional representation. The countries from the developed North include the USA and Canada (North America); Australia and New Zealand, Republic of Korea and Japan (Asia and the Pacific); Norway, Portugal, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Austria, Scotland and England (Europe); and South Africa (Africa). The countries from the developing South include the Philippines, Thailand, Bangladesh (Asia and the Pacific); Namibia, Mauritius, Burkina Faso and Benin (Africa); and Mexico (Latin America).

The first criterion of selection was that countries have either well-developed policy and practice in RVA, or islands of good practice, or are in the process of developing an RVA system, so that these can be compared and shared for the benefit of countries that have yet to develop RVA systems.

The second criterion was to select countries with distinct approaches to:

1. legislative environment, institutional processes and outcomes;
2. policy objectives with respect to the role of RVA in further learning and qualifications, workforce development, and social inclusion and personal empowerment; and
3. RVA in the context of institutions in the educational sector, workplace, and third-level institutions such as the non-governmental sector and agencies of civil society.

A third criterion was that the countries had participated in studies or international conferences that the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) promoted for the sharing of information and mutual learning.<sup>1</sup>

We also use government websites; journals, publications and recent conference papers; as well as publications by relevant international organisations – OECD, EU, CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) and ETF (European Training Foundation).

Information on countries from the various sources was analysed according to the three areas of research (strategic value; best practice and quality of processes, and challenges and future directions). Country examples are used to highlight the diversity of contexts and purposes, as well as the distinct processes and outcomes

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<sup>1</sup>These include the publication based on the international conference “Linking recognition practices to national qualifications frameworks: International benchmarking of experiences and strategies on the recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning. (Singh and Duvekot 2013); a consultation with Member States to draft the UNESCO Guidelines on the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2011); reports submitted to the CONFITEA V on the development and the state of the art of adult learning and education; contributions to 2008 and 2012 Association for the Development of Education in Africa Biennials and Triennials (Singh 2008; Steenekamp and Singh 2012); collaboration with the French National Commission in the context of two international seminars (France National Commission for UNESCO 2005, 2007); and UIL’s first international survey of 36 countries (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2005).

of RVA in the countries analysed. Developing typologies was a methodology used for comparing countries and arriving at points of divergence and convergence. Since RVA is a relatively new concept in many countries, it will take time before deeper understanding is developed. The study therefore does not aim to make any generalisations. Rather, it seeks to highlight a number of critical factors that are conducive to the implementation of RVA. Again, since RVA is a fast-moving field, the patterns that emerge here reflect the current situation in the countries studied.

Validation of the information was a major methodological element of the study. In most cases the official narrative was used. The strength of the evidence derived from the fact that the examples were taken from accounts by practising experts and officials who themselves have worked in the development of policy and practice of RVA at the national level, in the field of commissioned work for implementing RVA or in national research institutes. It was therefore possible to use information provided by persons with first-hand knowledge of RVA developments and implementation in their countries.

This study has been subject to two limitations. The first concerns the random selection of countries: while patterns, trends, convergences and divergences will be highlighted, generalisations cannot be made across all countries. The second limitation is that some regions (e.g. the Arab States) and some sub-regions (e.g. Central and Eastern Europe) are not represented.

## **1.8 Structure and the Content of the Chapters**

Chapter 2 provides a discussion of the concepts and the choice of terms and definitions used in this study. It includes a clarification of RVA and a presentation of models of RVA – the convergent model and one that encompasses the parallel or divergent model. This chapter underlines the trend towards lifelong learning as a standard. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the reciprocal relationship between lifelong learning and NQF developments: how lifelong learning has inspired learning outcomes-based national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), and how NQFs improve lifelong learning.

The subsequent three chapters deal with the strategic value of RVA in three different ways. Chapter 3 engages with countries' legislative environment. Chapter 4 further explores RVA's contribution to sustainable development (including educational, economic, social and cultural, and personal development), based on country policies and practice selected from a broad cross-section of international experience. Chapter 5 looks at shared responsibility among stakeholders.

Chapter 6 provides insights into features of "best practice" and the quality of RVA processes. It deals first with countries in the North and then countries in the South.

Chapter 7 charts some of the lessons that can be learnt and shared from current in-country practices – lessons that provide a way for countries to view, at a glance, key issues in RVA and that can be used to optimise educational reforms and achieve national development goals. Based on the foregoing analysis and comparison, the chapter aims to push the recognition process forward towards a set of global benchmarks that will serve the continued discussion on RVA.

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